

CLARK, WINIFRED M. EARLY DAY NEGRO SETTLERS.

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WINIFRED M. CLARK- STORIES.

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Indian Pioneer History-S-149.

October 12, 1938.

We came from Chicago and settled on a claim about two miles southwest of Tecumseh, Pottawatomie County.

We had a beautiful heifer that was a runaway. One night we heard her bell down in the settlement about one-half mile away. Some one had to go after her and as everybody was busy I was the one chosen for the task.

It was a lonely road and dangerous for a girl to go alone after nightfall, but I was of an adventurous spirit and went without fear.

As I drew near to the claim of George Garret I knew that he had put her into his corral with his cattle so I had to go up to his cabin to ask for her. I went to the door and they invited me in. I was afraid not to go in as they would think that I held myself too far above them but I could sense their surprise that I had been allowed to come there at night.

One of the girls sat in front of the fireplace trying to mend her coarse dress that she had torn while picking cotton. The only light that she had was from a low bed of coals in the fireplace. I noticed that the floor was earth and the ashes spread out under foot. I felt the

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embarrassment of the negro family that a white girl should come into their home and perhaps criticize them so I went outside to wait for the cow to be brought.

The moon was just coming up over the trees making light through the woods. North of the cabin there was a clearing surrounded by thick woods. This clearing was filled with a crowd of negroes. Nearly all were young women and girls with a few young men. The girls had their hair platted into short braids, with white strings twisted through them, sticking out in all directions from their heads. It was strange to see them form into a large circle and go through a slow dance which seemed like a ceremony of some kind. Their motions were eery and ghostlike because I was afraid to go very close to them. They were so dark and shadowy that it seemed like a queer dream.

A girl came out and stood near me. I asked her what it meant and she answered: "Campmeeting is coming soon and they are having their last dance until it is over. It will last maybe three weeks, maybe more." I asked why she and her sisters were not in it. She said: "My father says it is sin so we can't dance."

A lame boy brought my heifer and went with me down

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the long lane to open the heavy gate. When I came out into the open country road I breathed more freely and made good time getting home.

When the close of the campmeeting came they had their baptizing at Little River about four miles south of where we lived. When the preacher undertook to baptize some of the big fat women they would throw themselves into what they called the "powers" and he had a hard time controlling them. They lashed the water and made a great fuss but finally walked out meekly.

They asked for singers to join the choir and two black boys who were called "Snowball" by the saloon men volunteered. They had associated with the saloon crowd until all they knew were popular songs. It was a great treat to hear their solos, for they had fine voices, but a little out of place at a campmeeting baptizing.

George Garret had thirteen hounds. My brother often hunted with Garret when they went out after raccoons and opossums. They hunted for these animals at night. The negroes put 'possum in the ground for a while to take out.

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the wild animal taste, then they knew a way of cooking the 'possum so that it tasted almost as good as pig meat.

When I was on my way to school one day I saw a bunch of wild turkeys. They were not afraid of me for they surrounded me. I think they were so hungry, on account of the deep snow, that they had come too close to the settlement. I thought they were the property of a settler so mentioned seeing them. My brother became excited and went to tell Garret. The next day they went out after them. The result was that at Christmas we had seven turkeys hanging to the roof of the leanto kitchen, and kept them frozen until needed.

We had a tenant cabin on the claim built for a man named Arthur Blunt. Arthur liked to hunt 'possum. One morning he came home with nine 'possums tied to the saddle of my pony. I ran out to see them and said: "Are they dead, Arthur?" He answered: "Yas, Missy" as he untied the largest one. It was hanging head down but it suddenly curled up and bit him through the thumb.

The negroes were poor and depended on white folks

to help them. They would steal what they dared not beg. One day I discovered Arthur at the corn crib. I saw his black hat as he peeked around the crib. When he was out of sight my sister and I armed ourselves with sticks of wood and went up to the cabin. She went in at the west door and I went in at the east door. Arthur was sitting in the middle of the cabin on an upturned piece of log. I said: "Arthur, where did you hide the corn that you got out of the crib?" He looked innocent and said: "What corn, Missy?" I said: "We saw you, Arthur, and waited until you took it home before we followed. Now show us where it is." The poor old fellow began to cry and took us out to the little shelter where he kept his horse. The corn was in a deep hole right under the horse. He opened up the top covering and dragged out the sack. I told him to keep enough for two feeds for his horse and then to tell us when he needed more instead of stealing it. He said: "I never will do it again if you'll not tell de Boss." We promised, of course, but he had to be told.

Arthur was a faithful old man, but he was an ex-slave and had the notion that white people owed him a living. He

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and his boys thought it no harm to take anything they needed. I have caught the boys taking corn for their ponies, when the boys did not work for us.

One day my brother and Arthur were shaving logs for a new crib. They had lifted the sixteen foot beam to their shoulders to carry it to its place when my brother felt a sting in his thumb as if a big sliver had entered it. It seemed worse than an ordinary sting but he could not drop the log because it would have crushed Arthur's shoulder, so he had to wait until they could ease it to the ground. He found a scorpion stinging him. Arthur knew the remedy and helped bind the thumb.

Many times during the cold weather, Arthur would come to the house just before supper time. He would shamle in, his old torn hat in both hands, and stand against the wall behind the kitchen stove. He was so brown that as he stood in the shadow, behind the pipe, he became just a voice as he recalled for us vivid stories of his slavery days "befo' de wa'". He had been used as a strong, fleet runner ahead

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of the blood hounds, to train them to "catch niggers".

We thrilled to the description of those perilous times

and to his breathless recital of close escapes.

When supper was ready he would receive some food to take home to Mammy.

Mammy Blunt used to ask me to write her letters to her old "Marse Bob". She sent them regularly over a long period but never received an answer.